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# (U) Cryptologic Almanac 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Series

## ~~(S//SI)~~ "Night of the Living Coup":

### The 18/19 August 1991 Coup in Moscow

~~(S//SI)~~ One of the tasks of intelligence is to detect events of strategic importance before they occur. To do this effectively, it helps analysts and watch officers to have an idea of the signs or indications for which to look.



~~(S//SI)~~ In the summer of 1991, there was a chance for a coup involving conservative members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the military and the security services headed by the KGB. President Mikhail Gorbachev had tried for years, unsuccessfully, to effect political, social, and economic reforms of the Soviet system. There was much dissatisfaction with his regime from both conservative and liberal sources. Externally, the Warsaw Pact had dissolved.

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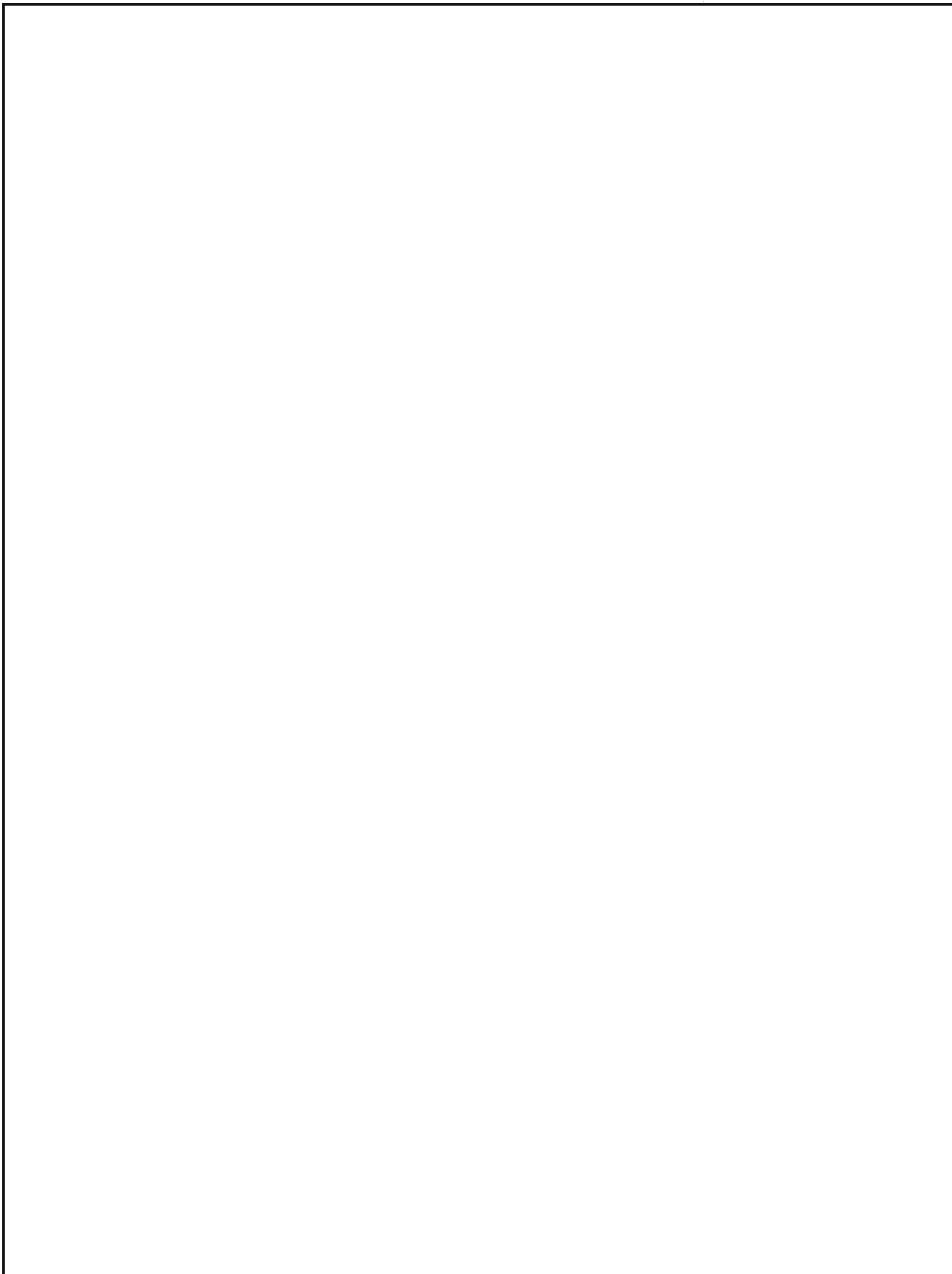
Gorbachev and the presidents of the various Soviet republics were scheduled to sign a new Union Treaty that would redefine the federal relationships within the USSR. This action may have sparked the actual coup attempt when it came.

~~(S//SI)~~ Since the previous November, when a disgruntled Russian citizen apparently had discharged a hunting rifle near Gorbachev during the annual parade celebrating the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917,

a possible coup. There had been unverified rumors and stories of Soviet paratroops hiding in the woods around Moscow and secret alerts by units of the Soviet armed forces.

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~~(TS//SI)~~ Then it happened. At 0305Z on the morning of 19 August, the Soviet news agency TASS announced that Gorbachev was unable to fulfill his duties as president of the USSR due to bad health. The vice president, Gennadiy Yanayev, would assume the role of president.

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By late 19 August, centers of resistance to the coup forces were forming quickly. The most important was Boris Yeltsin, whose speech from atop a tank outside the Russian parliament literally and symbolically rallied the anti-coup elements. The most critical point of the coup was reached on the evening of 20 August. Teams of paratroops and special troops from the MVD and KGB were ordered to storm the Russian Parliament, known as the White House, and to clear barricades from Moscow's streets that had been put up by citizens groups. Helicopter gunships were in the air to support these actions. However, several commanders of these teams refused to follow the order. They were unwilling to fire on their own citizens. With this option gone, the coup fizzled out. Many senior military commanders, who had not participated in the coup, began recalling troops from alert status. Late on 21 August, members of the State Committee for the State of the Emergency flew to Crimea to plead their case to Gorbachev. He was in no mood to forgive them. He returned to Moscow early on the morning of 22 August. The coup was over. But so was the old Soviet Union.

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